



TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE OF THE ANCIENT TAMILS – CONSERVATION OF SACRED ELEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Traditional knowledge systems play an important role in the conservation of sacred elements such as place names and its ecological significance, sacred grove, sacred tree, remnant tree worship, sacred gardens and sacred animals. The knowledge possessed by the indigenous communities and tribes has also been found to be very useful in the revival of folk traditions of Tamil Nadu. In ancient Tamil Nadu, the concept of *kaaval marangal* (Protecting trees) was prevalent. The ancient Tamils realised the social, economical, medicinal and environmental importance of these plants. Thus, willy-nilly genetic biodiversity was protected. For example, the red flowers of the Indian coral tree are used in the worship of Lord Vishnu and Lord Siva; the flowers of *Alari* (*Nerium indicum*) in the worship of Lord Siva and the Sun-god; of *ketaki* (*Yucca gloriosa*) in the worship of Lakshmi, and of *pala* or breadfruit (*Artocarpus integrifolia*) in the worship of Lord Vishnu. The use of some flowers is prohibited in worship rites like *vaagai* (sirisa or parrot tree/*Albizia lebbek*) in the worship of Lord Ganesha and *vengai* (*Pterocarpus marsupium*) in the worship of Lord Siva. Even if the tree withered, the worship still continued. Later the Tamils sculpted the image of the former sacred tree and worshipped it. Thousands of sacred groves have been documented, ranging from a few trees to forests of many acres. Early people throughout India maintained the tradition of sacred groves and forests. Sacred groves thus represent local folklore and religion. Unfortunately, these traditional sacred elements are subjected to severe biotic pressures.

KEY WORDS: sacred elements, sacred groves, sacred trees, remnant trees, biodiversity.

Introduction

Traditional knowledge plays very important role in the conservation and management of nature and natural resources. In ancient days, the Tamils classified the land into five different types, namely the forest (*kurunji*), the pastoral region (*mullai*), the desert (waste) land (*paalai*), the coastal area (*neidhal*) and the riverine plains (*marudham*). It is also significant to note that, each one of these zones was named after a flower, unique to the region.

At this juncture, I looked at the traditional knowledge on the conservation of sacred elements. Local knowledge systems have been found to contribute to sustainability in diverse fields such as conservation of sacred elements; some places named after plants and animals sacred grove, sacred tree, remnant tree worship, sacred gardens and sacred animals. Local knowledge has also been found useful for revival of folk traditions in Tamil Nadu and these traditions are useful for the conservation of sacred elements.

In Tamil Nadu, local practices of vegetation management were perhaps derived from the basic ecological concepts of local communities reflected in "bio-geographical zones like concepts in Tamil tradition" (Raman, 1998). The characteristic features of bio-geographical zones are that, the unit of nature is often defined in terms of five *thinai* and is described in the ancient literature *Tolkappiam*. It also briefly describes the life style of the people of each zone and their distinguishing characteristics. We also find this idea of five *thinai*s running through the entire gamut of the *Sangam* works. The five zones were: *kurunji* or the hilly tracts, *mullai* or the pastoral region, *paalai* or the desert land, *neidhal* or the coastal area and the *marudham* or the riverine plains. It is significant to note that, each one of the zones was named after a flower unique to that area. Tamil literary works also give details of the representation of a primitive society and the transformation of this into a developed one, regarding the nature of polity, economy and society.

In Tamil tradition, *thinai* means culture and it was believed that the environmental factors influenced culture and behaviour of organisms associated with it. Broadly, they had two classifications: *agam* (love) and *puram* (war). They assigned certain regions for *agam* and some for *puram*. The seven aspects of war were symbolized by seven flowers: *Vetchi* (*Ixora coccinea*), *vanji* (*Tinospora cordifolia*), *kanchi* (*Trewia nudiflora*), *ulignai* (*Erua lanatar*), *tumbai* (*Borago zeylan*), *vaagai* (*Albizia lebbek*) and *Patan*. Later, two more were added, *karantai* (*Ocimum pilosum*) and *nochi* (*Vitex negundo*).

Ecological traditions and name of places

Another interesting evidence for the influence of ecological factors on human settlements in Tamil Nadu is provided by the names of villages. The villages located near the hills often had suffixes like *kundru* (e.g. Kunrathur, Paramkuntram) or *malai* (e.g. AAgarmalai); those on the banks of the rivers were named as *aarur* or *thurai*; those at the confluence of rivers as *koodal* (e.g. Thimmukoodal near Chengalpet); and those near the lakes were called *yeri* (e.g. Maran-yeri, Tiraineri, Thenneri). Villages were named after tanks *kulam* (e.g. Karungulam, Perumkulam, Tiruvallikkeni (white lily tank) and even after springs (*aruvii*) (e.g. Peraruvu in Tirunelveli District). Tiruvaiyaru is located at the confluence of five rivers. Places named after the animals and birds are numerous. Puliyur,

Pulipakkam (Chengalpattu District), Karadipatti (Madurai District), Aanaiyur, Aanaika, and Maanturai (Tiruchi District) have been named after animals. Mayiladuturai and Mayilapur (after the peacock), Koliyur (Uraiyur in Tiruchi District), Kuyilkudi (after the cuckoo) in Madurai District, Tiru-kalugu-kunram (Chengalpattu District), Kazhugumalai (after the eagle) are some examples of places named after birds. Places have also been named after the nature of the soil: Semmanjeri (after red-soil), Karisikadu (black soil near Koilpatti), Manalur (sandy village), etc.

The culture and lifestyle of the ancient Tamils were deeply intertwined with trees, foliage and flowers. On special occasions, the kings of ancient Tamilagam decorated themselves with particular flowers: the Cheras with *pondhai* / *panam poo* (*Borassus flabellifer*), the Cholas with *aathi* (*Capparis zeylanica*), and the Pandyas with *vembu* (*Azadirachta indica*). The objectives of battle were indicated by specific flowers such as, *vetchi*, *vanji*, *ulainai*, *kaanchi*, *thumbai* and *vaagai*. Seasonal behaviour like flowering, producing new leaves, or shedding of flowers and leaves was taken as an indication of future happenings. Before waging major wars, warriors prayed in front of the *Unna* tree for an indication of the result. This tree was revered by devotees for its unfailing prophetic attributes. The king in times of war, appealed to this tree to bloom in emerald verdure as a token of victory to the king (*Purapporur Vennpamalai*, 243). If the result of the battle was going to be in favor of the king, then the *Unna maram* (*Grewia tilifolia*) would display fresh foliage and stand erect and strong and if he were to face defeat, then it would be weak and dry (*Padittruppathu* 40). In each kingdom, a particular tree became part of the regal retinue and paraphernalia. The king worshipped that tree, and a healthy and strong tree represented the king and his rule. Such trees were known as *kaaval marangal*. In battles, kings established their victory by slashing the *kaaval marangal* of their opponents. *Madurai Kanchi* (153) refers to the victory of Pandyan Nedunchelian (*Padittruppathu* 11 12). Similar reference is made to celebrate the victory of Imayavaramban Neduncheralathan over the *kadambargal* by cutting the *kadamba tree*, which was their *kaaval maram*. Much of the available literature gives us extensive information about the same (see Subramania Pillai 1948, Fergusson, 1971, and Aravanan 1980, 1981). All these facts clearly indicate the unique dimensions of cultural integration of ancient Tamils, taking specific examples to illustrate tree worship, *sthala vrikshas* (sacred plants) and sacred groves (Anantanarayanan Raman and Arunai Palavarayan, 1998).

Sacred Plants

Tamil tradition and culture have successfully preserved biodiversity through the ages. An interesting feature of the temples of Tamil Nadu is their association with plants. In India, the antiquity of tree worship can be traced back to the Vedic Period (*Vanaspathi* and *Vanadevatas*). Trees came to be regarded as abodes of certain deities: the *asvatha* or *pipal* tree, the *vathapathra* (banyan) and the *thulasi* (basil) symbolized Vishnu; the *vilva* tree symbolized Shiva and the *kadambu* tree symbolized Muruga. Some temples were erected in places where such trees were worshipped and, in course of time, they came to be associated with the temples as *sthala vrikshas*: *jambu* tree with Jambukesvaram, mango tree with Ekambareswarar Temple and fig (*athi*) tree with Attiyur (Varadaraja Perumal Temple, Kanchipuram). Madurai Meenakshi is described as *kadamba-vana-vasini*. So the temple trees were given special care and preserved. Even certain

flowers were associated with temples, e.g. *mahilam* flower in Alwar Tirunagari. Many temples are described as located in sacred groves e.g. Chidambaram on a *thillai* (a mangrove) forest. Srirangam on the banks of the river Kaveri was located amidst thick groves of many trees and was described graphically by Thondaradippodi Alwar in his *Tirumaalai*. It has the *pumai* tree as the *sthala vriksha*. Alwar Tirunagari in Tirunelveli district has the tamarind tree as its *sthala vriksha*, because the saint *Nammalvar* did penance under it and the sacred tree itself is worshipped as Thiru-pali-Alwar.

The sacred trees are symbolic of a single genetic resource and play an important role in the conservation of biodiversity. The social, economical, medicinal and environmental importances of these trees were recognised, and the sacred tree concept evolved as a means of conserving the land's rich plant genetic diversity. The sacred trees represent various geo-climatic habitats.

Sacred plants play a very important role in ecology. Sacred plants provide food, shelter and nesting substratum for several species of birds and squirrels. All individuals of certain species are totally protected. For instance, Banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*), Pipal (*Ficus religiosa*) and Indian Fig (*Ficus glomerata*) are afforded total protection in India. *Ficus* is now considered a keystone resource, playing a significant role in the conservation of many insects, birds and mammals. It is also an important species providing the site for beehives in a village near Tiruchirappalli.

Due to their ecological value and effective properties, sacred plants continue to be used in the religious and social ceremonies of the Hindus. The five most sacred leaves of pipal, Cluster fig, white fig (*Ficus lacor*), banyan and mango are ubiquitously employed in making prayers and offerings. On auspicious occasions, mango leaves are tied to a string and hung on doors as a welcome banner, and leaves of *purasu* and banyan make workable plates and bowls during community feasts. Leaves of some other trees are also customarily offered to deities e.g., *Vilvam* (Bengal quince) to Lord Siva, of banana and *Arjuna* to Lord Ganesha, and of *konrai* (*Cassia fistula*) to all the gods and goddesses. The red flowers of the Indian coral tree are used in the worship of Lord Vishnu and Lord Siva; of *Alari* (*Nerium indicum*) in the worship of Lord Siva and the Sun-god; of *ketaki* (*Yucca gloriosa*) in the worship of Lakshmi, and of *pala* or breadfruit (*Artocarpus integrifolia*) in the worship of Lord Vishnu.

The use of some flowers is prohibited in worship rites like *vaagai* (sirisa or parrot tree/*Albizia lebbek*) in the worship of Lord Ganesha and *vengai* (*Pterocarpus marsupium*) in the worship of Lord Siva. Areca nut which symbolizes Lord Ganesha is commonly used in various rites. Banana is offered to Lord Vishnu and Lakshmi on the eleventh day of the bright half of *Pausa* (December-January), and to the Sun god on the sixth day of the bright fortnight of *Kartika* (October-November). Mango and *vilvam* fruits are also included in the worship material-the former is offered to all gods, the latter especially to Lord Siva.

The wood of the sacred trees like *vilvam*, banyan, *vanni*, *purasu* and pipal is never used as fuel, as it is believed to invite the wrath of gods. But it is employed in other ways, in sacrificial rites and ceremonies. Sandalwood is turned into paste and applied to the forehead. The wooden seat used during the sacred thread ceremony is made of mango or *purasu*; the brahmacharin is also made to walk with a stick of *purasu*. During the sacred thread ceremony, a brahmacharin has to perform sacrifice using pipal twigs called *samit*. After a person dies, twigs of *vilvam* are placed near the central pillar of the house and those of neem scattered near the corpse. Devotees of Shiva wear the seeds of the Rudraksha as rosaries, which are used in meditation. The Indian Mesquite tree (*Prosopis spicigera*) is the most feared and respected, because it represents the planet Saturn and Agni, the powerful Fire God.

Remnant Tree Worship (*Kandhu* worship)

The Tamils considered the tree sacred and worthy of worship. If the sacred tree happened to fade or perish, it did not cease to be sacred and worship was still continued. The withered tree after some days would wear away, except for the lower part of the trunk. This part of the tree, in the form of a stump, was worshipped by the people who preserved this last vestige of the stump, referred to as *kandhu*. The people believed that, to keep the spirit dwelling in the stump of the decayed tree, the usual offerings and worship should be carried on regularly as evidenced by the *Pattinappalai* 246-249; *Agananuru* 287:4; 307:22; *Tirumurugatruppadai*, 226; *Pattinappalai*-249; *Tiruvilaiyadarpanam*, 18.

A *kadamba* tree (*Anthocephalus cadamba*), once flourished in the Meenakshi Sundareswarar Temple at Madurai. Today, only the stump remains and is covered by a silver plate. In Tirupadhiripuliyur, the remains of the *padhiri* tree (*Sterospermum suvedens*), under which Goddess Sivagami performed penance to get rid of her sins, are covered by copper plate. In Tiruvothur, the base of the ancient *panai* (*Borassus flabellifer*) is covered by copper plate, which is circumambulated and worshipped by the devotees (Sundara Sobhidharaj, 1991). In Kutralam, the remnant base of the perished *kurumpala* tree (*Artocarpus integrifolia*) has been protected in a separate room. Later, the Tamils sculpted the image of the former sacred tree and worshipped it. An excellent example for this is in the Ekambareswarar Temple, where a sculpture depicted with woman hugging the mango (*Mangifera indica*) tree and in Tiruvanaikka, the goddess is worshipping the *lingam* under a *naval* (*Syzigium cumini*) tree.

There are several examples of sculptures of trees: in Kutralam people worship the *lingam* under the *kurumpala*; in Kurukkai, the tree is worshipped by the goddess and *rishis*; in Tirukuvalai, the *lingam* under a tree is worshipped by the king and others; in Anbilalandhurai, the *lingam* under the tree is worshipped by a king; in Tirukottai, a *rishi* sits under the *kottai chedi* (*Ricinus communis*) and in the five metal sculptures of the Tirumangalam temple, one of the *nayanars* is seen under the *konrai* tree.

Sacred Groves

In the Tamil literature of the Sangam period (300 BC – 300 AD), people were seen as one of the components of five different ecosystems. Each ecosystem had people carrying out their unique habits of hunting, gathering, cultivating and worshipping deities. It appears that, the ancient deities of Tamil Nadu are the present deities worshipped in villages under different names. Although some of the deities may not be associated with extensive forest cover, most are found in intimate association with at least a small grove of plants. These are the Sacred Groves. Sacred groves, dedicated to local deities or ancestral spirits, are found all over India. Most of these are associated with reservoirs, ponds, springs or streams and many of them are located in catchments near the origins of springs or streams.

Thousands of sacred groves have been documented, ranging from a few trees to forests of many acres. Such sacred groves are of increasing interest to nature conservation, because they help preserve threatened plants and animals. Early people throughout India maintained the tradition of sacred groves and forests.

Sacred groves represent local folklore and religion. Every village has a grove, a protected area associated with local folk deities of obscure origin. Amman or the Mother Goddess is enshrined in one of her many forms as Kaali, Maari, Pidaari, Ellai, and so on. In front of the shrine is, either a natural pond or artificial tank. Surrounding the shrine and the water body are the male escorts or consorts of Amman, generally regarded as ferocious spirits or Veerans (brave warriors) such as, Ayyanaar, Karuppusamy, Muniyaandi, Muneeswaran, and Madurai Veeran.

Sacred groves and forests are an area of conservation as well as a spiritual retreat. They probably represent the single most important ecological heritage of the ancient culture of Tamil Nadu. The most important conservation tradition was the sacred grove, a protected forest area in the village. There are references found in Tamil literature about the groves, but the tradition probably goes further back in time, to food-gathering societies who venerated nature and the natural resources on which they depended for their existence.

Local deities have a significant role in the socio-religious life of the local people and the fear of these deities prevails among the villagers, which prevents them from entering the forest to destroy it. Untimely death, epidemic, famine, wild animal attack and so on, are considered as the deity's fury if the sanction is dishonoured. The nature of this fear was easily conveyed through popular folk belief and tales. These stories considerably highlight the socio-cultural and religious elements of fear through which these forests were being guarded. This also reveals how a community imposes a discipline on itself and how the fear of a deity compels them to follow the simple rule, to conserve the dedicated sacred elements such as sacred groves or a sacred tree.

The sacred groves, being the home of the local flora and fauna, represent a mini biosphere reserve, making them an essential part of the conservation process. The rich plant life helps to retain subsoil water and during the hot summer months, the pond in the grove is often the only source of drinking water. The groves are a unique form of biodiversity conservation, and are living examples of the Indian tradition of conserving the ecology as a natural heritage.

Sacred Gardens

Kings, nobles and merchants maintained gardens for the supply of fruits and flowers for ritual offerings in the temples. From the literary and epigraphic sources, we come to know that our temples were located amidst groves and fertile fields, for e.g. Alagar malai which was called *Maal-irum-solai*. Alwars and Nayanmars who visited the villages in every nook and corner of Tamil Nadu, always made it a point to describe the flora and fauna of the area. Good examples of these are the morning songs (*tirupalli-eluchi*) of Thondaradippodi Alwar (on Srirangam) and Manikkavasagar. The inscriptions of Srirangam provide numerous instances of grants for gardens and orchards to the temple. Special staff was employed for maintaining the gardens. They were called *tirunandavana-kaingkaryar*, and lands granted to the gardens and their maintenance was known as *tirunandavana-puram*. An interesting inscription of 10th century AD refers to the reclamation of land on the banks of the Kaveri that were damaged and silted after severe floods made them unsuitable for wet crops. Hence, they utilized them for gardens. A record dated 1316 AD at Varadaraja Perumal Temple Kanchipuram, mentions a royal grant for the maintenance of a flower garden (*pushpavanam*), and four lotus tanks for the supply of water, flowers and vegetables to the temple. Twenty gardeners were appointed for the purpose. The record gives a list of trees and plants therein like *javanthi*, *alari*, *jaathi*, *champaka*, *maadulai*, mango, coconut, orange and lemon.

Shrines on the Road

Another tradition is the worshipping of open-air shrines on the roads of Tamil Nadu. Almost all the villages of Tamil Nadu are studded with different types of

temples and deities. Some of these temples are represented symbolically. They are worshipped in the form of natural landmarks, such as the banks of the water bodies, river and stream or in a field or as a tree. Many such shrines exist in the streets of different communities, viz., a sacred stone grappled by the roots of a banyan tree, a tiny niche tucked into the side of a building, an ancient carving resting on a cement platform at crossroads. The shrines themselves are relatively simple and they are simply covered and or open. These are called open-air shrines. The simplest forms of shrine consist of a pile of stones on the bank of the water bodies, river and stream or in a field. Villages often have a number of shrines to different deities located at the periphery of the village. One can find the image of Lord Ganesha under a pipal tree on the banks of the lake, ponds and rivers and its shrine is open to the skies. It is believed that, Lord Ganesha fulfills desires. Where the shrines contain anthropomorphic images of the deity, they are usually roughly carved in stone, garlanded with flowers and sometimes dressed in clothing.

Most of the roadside shrines in Tamil Nadu are associated with reservoirs, ponds, river, springs or streams. Many of these shrines are housed under the trees such as banyan, pipal and neem. These trees are never felled, but leaves may be lopped for fodder and small twigs are used as fuel wood. Trees also provide protection to bunds of the reservoirs, ponds, river, springs or streams, and the water from these resources is used for bathing, irrigation and drinking. These plants protect several plant and animal species valuable for food, medicinal and other uses. Despite increased pressures, these plants protect and shelter many animal species which might have vanished elsewhere in the surrounding environment, often including endemic and endangered species. For example, the pipal is now considered a keystone resource playing a significant role in the conservation of many insects, birds and mammals (Terborgh 1986). Therefore, these plants act as antimicrobes, air purifier and absorb the pollutants and gives good air and cool climate. In general, there are no detailed accounts or inventories of biodiversity in these plants species as yet.

Sacred Animals

Another tradition worth mentioning is the worshipping of animals in Tamil Nadu. Several animals have been considered sacred by one or more communities. The most common sacred animals are the Tiger, Cow, Peacock, Tortoise, Cobra, Elephant, Monkey, Buffalo, Bear, Jackal, Dog, Deer and Black buck (Presler, 1971). The tradition of attributing sacred qualities to plants and animals may go back to the days of hunter-gatherers and shifting cultivation (Chandran and Gadgil, 1993). Sacred animals became the mounts of various Hindu gods and goddesses, symbolizing the character of the deity and integrated with the iconography. Sometimes, animals developed sanctity by this association such as the swan; eagle and bull are the vehicles of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva respectively. The characters of the animals are used to symbolize the benevolent nature of the Gods. Often, the option of the specific animal for a God is associated with esoteric meaning. For example, the *vahana* of Durga is the lion. Some of the animals are sacred themselves, such as Ganesha the elephant headed god, Hanuman, the monkey god and Naga, the snake god (Israel and Singlair, 1989). By recognizing the divinity in animals, the Tamil tradition gave them an equal position unparalleled in any other tradition. Of all animal gods, the most popular god is the Ganesha, who is believed to be the remover of obstacles. The *vahana* namely, *mooshika* or mouse represents desire – the reason for which is obscure.

Besides the above, the most worshipped one is the Hanuman, the Monkey-God. Hanuman is portrayed as a devoted servant of the Lord Rama, his reverent devotion to the almighty and reliable celibacy. The myth talks of the antics of this character that brought about the fall of a mighty king Ravana and secured the release of Sita – Rama's consort.

Snake worship is very popular in Sangam Age. *Kurunthogai* (282) refers to the people who gratify the snake (*Nagam*) god lived under the *marudham* tree (*Terminalia arjuna*). Its veneration is also an important part of Tamil tradition. Snakestones are found all over Indian temples and sometimes under the Peepal and Neem trees. It is the image of cobra with its two-eyed hood on a stone that is worshipped. Women desiring children erect snake stones under these sacred trees, and these stones have stylized cobras carved on them represent the Goddess Nagammal (snake goddess). As mentioned earlier, these were usually erected under Neem or Peepal trees, and prayers and rituals were performed. Women take an early morning bath and circumambulate these trees (Ayyar, 1982). There are beliefs that, an infertile woman can conceive if she offers prayer to the goddess Nagathamman. Vows are sometimes made at a snake shrine with the object of conception, and if a child is born, it is named Nagappa or Nagamma (Thurston, 1975). This is believed to bless the worshipper with wealth.

In addition to these, Tamils also worship the *puthu* (anthills), a residing place of snakes, and offer oblation on the auspicious days. Puthupet near Pondicherry is named after the sacred *puthu*. There is also an association between snakes and trees, both being symbols of fertility and the roots of trees like the termite mound, is seen as an entrance to the otherworld. The mounds are frequently marked with ash and offerings of milk or eggs are made to the resident *Naga*.

Another interesting tradition is to feed the birds. At the temple of Vedagiriswarar, on top of the hill Thirukazhukundram, there is a tradition that

two Brahmany kites visit the temple on the hill every noontime where they are fed. Thus, the place is named Thiru Kazhukundram (Thiru + Kazhugu + kundram). Besides, places such as Kazhugumalai are named after the Brahmany kite or Garuda.

Conclusion

The ancient Tamils attached great importance to the preservation of natural resources and biodiversity. These resources were considered not only a source of material well being, but also a reflection of the character of the state and the citizens. In this article, I have made an attempt to explore the importance of the sacred elements and their role in ecological traditions. The ecological traditions are very important to mankind, and ecological sites have played key roles in regulating various functions such as hydrological cycles, rainfall, temperatures, local climatic conditions and support to bio-diversity. Of course they also provide significant economic support to the society and to the local people in various ways. Unfortunately, ecological traditions have been subjected to severe biotic pressures with indiscriminate exploitation, excessive demands for the commercial purpose and various other such causes. It is time, we revived ecological traditions and realise the role they play in conservations.

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